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ABSTRACT

For this study, 12 part-time students in an early childhood studies program were interviewed and videotaped concerning their personal stories as students. Initial analysis of their responses revealed main themes: (1) economic barriers to full-time degree study; (2) domestic responsibilities/gender issues (for example, the stress of juggling multiple responsibilities, the pleasure of pursuing an activity outside the home, and male students' status in the "minority"); (3) previous education/studying for a degree (students indicated that their current studies had improved their previous fearful or negative attitudes toward education); and (4) workplace links (students indicated a definite impact of their studies on their working lives). Characteristics of interview sample, invitation letter, and video questions are appended. (Contains 17 references.) (EV)

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LISTENING TO STUDENTS: STUDYING FOR A PART-TIME DEGREE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES

ELIZABETH BURN

ED 447 899

"I'm very proud I'm studying for a degree"

WENDY (a white female NNEB).

"I want to be here . . no-one's forcing me to come"

MARISA (a black female NNEB).

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COMPLEXITY, DIVERSITY AND MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD.

EECERA CONFERENCE

INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION **London 1st September 2000**

This paper is to be read in conjunction with the video presentation **'Talking to students'** *edited by* **Penny Holland.**

Work in progress; please do not quote without permission.

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LISTENING TO STUDENTS

ELIZABETH BURN

> "If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings."
>
> P. Freire (1970:69).

INTRODUCTION

When Penny Holland and I decided to ask students to tell us their stories about studying on our part-time ECSS, we took a risk. We were aware of the ethical issues of engaging in this feminist model of research:

> "The interview process itself raises questions about the relationship between the researcher and the researched, and the influence that the researcher may have on the stories being told."
>
> Lea, M. and West, L. (1995:178)

We also recognised how research aimed at 'empowerment' can itself further objectify and silence the 'Educational Other" (De Beauvoir, 1949: Hall, 1997; Skeggs 1997). Gore (1992:54) rightly points out the superficial nature of many liberatory research projects, when she asks 'Who is empowering whom?'. However, we also agree with Coffey and Delamont (2000:61) when they discuss how, by examining lived experiences in a necessarily "messy" way, we can deconstruct and explore further unequal power relations in our education system. The need to research "the ordinary and everyday in order to destabilize it." (Theobald, 1999:21). I am writing this initial "messy" conference paper from a personal standpoint, in order to find out more about why so many non-traditional students underachieve academically and come to accept that they do not have the potential to study for a degree whilst still at school (Plummer 2000).

I am also writing this paper from the personal position of being a wife and mother with three children when I studied for my first degree and subsequent MA on a part-time basis. I was an Open University student whilst working full-time as a primary teacher in inner-city schools. I carry empathy with these students who are also studying part-time whilst working and, in many cases, looking after family. So this paper is not written by a 'neutral' researcher who is attempting to distance researcher from the researched (Kirsch, 1999).

Penny and I did not know if the students would respond to our offer to listen to their study stories but twelve did (see Appendix) and we are particularly grateful to them for contributing to this paper and the accompanying video. Their voices are important to be heard when discussing access to education at any level of our education system.

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I also recognise that all feminist theory is partial (Flax, 1995:156). However, the very act of negotiating, claiming and disowning the many competing memories that constitute a particular narrative (Weiner, 1994) will itself allow us to know it differently. Penny and I hope that both student and audience response to this conference video and introductory paper will lead to further discussion of exclusionary practices in education. We seek to develop models of inclusionary pedagogical practices (Lewis, 1993:189) that can enable students to disown their earlier experiences of education if they result in a sense of ongoing failure (Plummer, 2000; Osler, 1997). Early school experiences that often result in certain students believing (Luttrell, 1997; Reay, 1998; Wright, 1992) that they are:

> "not really academic by nature."
>
> (Françoise, a white female NNEB.)

even when they gain qualifications.

THE MAIN THEMES

Several themes emerged from the initial viewing of the video interviews with our ECSS students. Although the sample size was small and included a diverse range of students (see Appendix), their stories evidenced a number of critical issues. I recognise this list as both impressionistic and exploratory, but despite these provisos, the issues raised by the narratives do indicate clear areas of discrimination that still operate to prevent equal access to Higher Education. The interviews also show that once Early Years workers have gained access to further academic studies, the spin-offs for both their personal development and workplace practices are very high. It seems mutually beneficial from both personal and professional standpoints to support further academic studies for Early Years workers. These studies need to be financed by employers as well being approved by them. The students who were given financial assistance for their studying greatly valued this level of economic support. Managers ought to recognise the positive outcomes individual academic study brings to the workplace itself. Outcomes that will ultimately benefit the children that the practitioners are working with in a wide range of Early Years settings.

A ECONOMIC BARRIERS TO FULL-TIME DEGREE STUDY

All of the students indicated that economic hardships had influenced their decision to study for a degree through a part-time route. Whether they have family commitments or not, the economic cost of pursuing their academic studies are high. The general consensus was "I can't afford not to work" (Steven). Several students, such as Val, had taken out study loans in order to pay the fees; whilst Dawn needed to work in order to pay the mortgage and contribute towards supporting her young family. This reality of constantly having to juggle scarce financial resources in order to pay fees, buy course books etc. had followed these students throughout their adult lives.

Heidi, for example, selected to study for her NNEB as an earlier qualification because: ". . . It was the cheaper option, there was no way I could afford the fees as an overseas student."(the fees of a full-time degree). Some of the students on the ECSS were being financially supported by their employers to a limited degree, in ways that included study leave or financial assistance to buy books. Joanne, a young black NNEB, did not have the money to start the part-time ECSS degree until her LEA decided to support her. On the other hand, students such as Val and Heidi had clearly been told by their employers 'there is no funding' and they are facing a heavy financial burden in order to pay their fees. Overall, the video interviews demonstrate that economic factors do influence the educational choices these early years workers had, and this financial pressure is lifelong. Several students commented on the present low salaries that they receive as early childhood practitioners. Salaries that leave little or no option for full-time degree study, this is the only route they can afford.

B DOMESTIC RESPONSIBILITIES/GENDER ISSUES

All of the women with childcare responsibility disclosed stories about career breaks and domestic duties that had impacted on their employment history. They placed their own academic needs as secondary to their family commitments. However, for some of the women, the employment break meant that they became further involved in early childcare work. Françoise found that when her children were young, her experience in the voluntary sector "fitted in really nicely" with her family life. There were clear tensions in having to juggle domestic chores, early years work and academic study. Wendy finds it "difficult being a full-time mum, but I'm coping." George recognises that once his child is born, he too will have less time to devote to his studies. Teresa describes how "time's the biggest thing . . . my children are not little . . they need more of my time." There was a sense that a return to study for the women was, in many cases, a way of re-establishing their identity as a person rather than being in a role of primarily servicing others. "I reached a point in my life when I wanted to see if my brain was still working." (Heidi). Emotive statements, such as "It's changed my life", "I'll NOT stop" and "I'm doing it for ME", evidence the positive way degree study has impacted on these women's lives. "I'm very, very proud . . it's changed my life". "It's made me much more alive".

The two white, male NNEBs interviewed both commented on their minority status in the Early Years workplace and on this degree. "Being the only male . . I didn't find it easy . . . I'm kind of used to it . . everyone kind of looks "(George) Whilst for Steven, his entry into early childhood work was also framed by gender difference: "I found it really difficult being a man, is it an easy option or a proper job?" The status of the role as well as the financial rewards were commented on by both men during their interviews. Steven found the sessions concerned with child protection difficult at first: "You are aware you are a man and you have to rise above that . . ." Both of the men were very positive about their experience of studying on the course and feel that the women students and the staff have been very supportive in enabling them to develop their confidence. They now feel that they are accepted as legitimate members of the student body and are enjoying their studies.

C PREVIOUS EDUCATION/STUDYING FOR A DEGREE

Returning to academic study as mature students, even on a part-time basis, has clearly impacted on the self-image of these students. Sandra, for instance, who left school at fifteen, used words like" I was terrified" when describing her first visit to register for the degree. Joanne did not tell people that she was studying for a degree, in case she did not get through her first year. George described how his confidence has grown since beginning further academic studies: "Two or three years ago . . . I wouldn't have dreamt of it . . . I didn't have the confidence to study for a degree." There is a sense of conflict between what these students view as 'academic' and 'a proper book' and their construction of self. They refer to how, when they first started the degree, the Study Skills course motivated and inspired them in a way that mediated their previous sense of academic inferiority. However, this newly found educational confidence is not firmly established for all students and the comment made by Françoise "I'm not academic by nature" is typical of many of the students' expressed views. They still doubt their ability to succeed, but they are determined to do so:

> "When I gain that degree and come out with Honours . . I'll be very proud."
> (Wendy).

There is also a sense that this time the students are 'in control' of their studies: they can pace themselves; select the number of modules they study at any one time; take time out for home or work responsibilities; and select distance learning modules as well as attending the taught course. This is in stark contrast to some of the negative descriptions of secondary school and words such as "I hated school" indicate very painful previous learning experiences. "I am choosing to do this, I'm not being told - this is for ME". Age is not seen as a barrier to part-time study: "I am the oldest in the class, the course gave me the courage . . . some students get a degree at 65" (Celia).

It was quite inspiring for me to both interview students and subsequently watch the video excerpts that so clearly demonstrate how academic study can enable students to gain so much pride and satisfaction from their learning experiences. When studying for my Open University degree I also met students who expressed exactly the same sense of passionate involvement with their studies:

> "My life stops when I've got work to do. I don't think of this in a negative way, this is too PRECIOUS to me."

D PRAXIS: WORKPLACE LINKS

Throughout all of the interviews there was engaged discussion about the effect of academic study on the students' workplace practices. Dawn, for example talks about how she has recently been discussing young children's schemas with other nursery nurses and teachers. Since George has studied the WORKING WITH PARENTS module, his colleagues have asked him to develop a school policy about parental involvement. He is writing this policy in conjunction with parents. In other instances, the books that have been purchased for the degree are now situated in the staff room libraries and form a valuable resource for other Early Years staff to delve into.

There is also evidence that the diversity of the student body itself is contributing towards developing innovative pedagogical practices. "We talk about our practice with other students and discuss our child observations." Students comment on how valuable it is that they have gained access to listening to the experiences of other students who teach in very different locations. "It is interesting for me to listen to the experience of students working in rural locations". Many of these students were themselves recruited onto this degree by 'word of mouth'. They also talk about how other Early Years workers in their present workplaces are becoming interested in further academic study since hearing about their experience on the course. The teaching styles employed on the taught course further contribute to student learning:

> "We learn in groups, we phone each other up,
> we mix together and study together".

CONCLUSION: "Embracing Diversity"

Listening to the students' individual stories, even within the imposed constraints of a tutor-structured questionnaire (Griffiths, 1998) and video interview (see Appendix) supports the importance of listening to student voice (hooks, 1994). Their narratives enable us to reflect on how wider societal inequalities still operate to exclude the Academic Other. In agreement with Tett (2000), who interviewed a sample of students over three years, entering the Academy is 'different' for non-traditional students. She found that the students:

> " . . . showed their awareness of the structural inequalities that impeded their transition to becoming university students . . . "

The voices of these determined and committed ESCC students, who gave up their time to be interviewed, further invites us to start asking why so few students from certain backgrounds study for degrees. The present academic profile of these students demonstrates that they are well able to study at degree level, when they have access. So why is it that in our present education system:

> "Children from working-class homes are no more likely to get educational qualifications than twenty years ago"?
>
> (Hackett, 2000).

I had imagined that this short introductory paper would focus more on the way academic study has enriched workplace practices in Early Years settings. The video certainly does reveal this important development; but it also, for me, reveals the complex ways these particular students were excluded from Higher Education in the first place. As well as being economically disadvantaged, some of the students came to believe that they were academically deficit due to gender, ethnicity or social class background.

Penny and I will be carefully reflecting on the individual video stories at a future date, which may well involve further participation from the students themselves. We would welcome both "interpretive conflict" (Kirsch, 1999) and other feedback from conference delegates. Please share this initial paper and contact us with your views, your experiences, your ideas. However, from this short exploratory paper, the main question to emerge has to be: How do we create classrooms where students are not switched off from academic study in the first place?

Valerie (a white, female NNEB) reflected:

> "I left secondary school thinking that I'd NEVER go back into learning."

How can we prevent other pupils developing the same thoughts?

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APPENDIX

1 INTERVIEW SAMPLE

2 LETTERS SENT TO STUDENTS INVITING THEM TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH

3 VIDEO QUESTIONS

1 INTERVIEW SAMPLE

1 VAL

Val is an NNEB in a nursery class in a primary school. She has been working in Early Years for as long as she can remember. She feels that there are not many career development options for nursery nurses and aims to qualify as a teacher.

2 MARISA

Marisa has worked in Early Years for 7 years since qualifying as an NNEB and is now a deputy in an Early Years Centre. She feels that the course has given her "different goals and visions"

3 SANDRA

Sandra has worked for 22 years in Early Years, starting with the pre-school playgroup association then working as a classroom assistant. She is now working as a special needs assistant with children with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

4 HEIDI

Heidi has worked in Early years for nearly 20 years and is now a nursery nurse in a reception class. She originally chose to qualify as an NNEB as it was a more affordable option than a B.Ed for an overseas student. She intends to complete a PGCE and qualify as a teacher.

5 WENDY

Wendy has 11 years experience as an NNEB and is currently working in a nursery school. She intends to qualify as a teacher.

6 STEVEN

Steven qualified as an NNEB 6 years ago and has been working since then in a special school. He had wanted to go into childcare for a long time before that, but had to keep working as a painter and decorator to pay the bills and save up for the course. He now wishes to qualify as a teacher.

7 **FRANCOISE**

Françoise qualified as an NNEB in the early 1980s and then worked in a range of Early Years settings. She is now a lecturer in Early Childhood studies in a college of Further Education. She feels she may wish to return to practice with young children.

8 **DAWN**

Dawn has been an NNEB in a primary school nursery class for the past 5 years and hopes to be a teacher to increase the future prospects for her family.

9 **JOANNE**

Joanne has been working as an NNEB for more than 8 years since qualifying. She worked initially for an agency, gaining wide experience, then worked in a college nursery and is now working at an Early Years centre.

10 **CELIA**

Celia is a qualified teacher from Nigeria, whose certificate is not recognised as a teaching qualification in the UK. She now works with the elderly but would like to return to working with young children. Celia wishes she had come across the course years ago.

11 **TERESA**

Teresa has worked as an NNEB for 20 years. Earlier in her career she worked in social services nurseries, but after a break when her children were young she returned to work at a nursery school. She came onto the scheme directly after completing an ADCE.

12 **GEORGE**

George has worked as an NNEB in a nursery school since qualifying 6 years ago. Before that he had worked in adventure playgrounds and hopes that completing this course will open up different career pathways within Early Years.

2 LETTERS SENT TO STUDENTS INVITING THEM TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH

Dear student, Last term you responded to a letter inviting you to participate in a video we are making about the experiences of students on the Early Childhood Studies Scheme. Many thanks to all of you who responded.

We are now ready to move on to the next phase and video record the interviews.

The sessions to do this will be informal and the questions will be based on your experiences rather than your knowledge eg. Why did you decide to start the course? How has the course effected you practice? Do you see yourself as a university student? How does your experience on the ECSS relate to your previous educational experiences?

We have set aside three days over the half term week for the interviews/discussions. Please indicate below which session would be best for you. You can indicate a first and second choice. Please call if you have any questions.

Please return the form urgently this week, either through the register or by post. We will contact you very shortly with the final arrangements.

If you can't make any of the dates please respond with some alternatives.

Thanks for your support.

Penny Holland 020 7607 2789 ext.2618

Elizabeth Burn 020 7607 2789 ext.2644

Name .....
Contact numbers .....

	Tuesday 30th May	Thursday 1st June	Friday 2nd June
am 10.00-1.00			
pm 2.00- 5.00			

3 VIDEO QUESTIONS

Intro can you tell us a little bit about yourself? What job you are doing, how long you have worked in early years, previous experience of studying, how long you have been on the course etc.

1) Can you tell us why you decided to apply for the course?

   How did you hear about it?
   What made it attractive to you?.. .timing, flexibility

2) When you started the course did you feel welcomed, did you receive an effective introduction, how could this be improved?

3) At what level did you enter the course?

4) How does studying on the course match with your previous educational experience?

   How does the course differ from INSET or training courses you may have attended?

5) What do you tell family, friends and colleagues about your studies? Do you say you are studying for a university degree?

6) Have family, friends, partners and colleagues been supportive and encouraging?

7) Does anything get in the way of you throwing yourself into the course and benefiting fully from your studies?

8) Has studying on the course effected your practice? How? Can you give some examples?

9) Do you think it makes a difference that you are studying with other practitioners from a range of workplaces? Can you tell us more about this?

10) Tutors on the course come from a range of early years work backgrounds. Are you aware of this? What difference do you think it makes?

11) How is studying on the scheme effecting your life and how you see yourself?

12) Are you intending to complete the whole degree course?
How do you think completing this course will effect your work and life opportunities?

What do you see yourself doing in 4 years time?

13) Have you been studying distance learning modules as well as attending the taught course?

How did studying distance learning modules compare with attending the taught course?

Why did you choose to study some distance learning modules?

14)Have you yet moved from one level of the course to another? How have you found the progression between levels?

Have you had sufficient academic support?

15) Do you pay for the course yourself or does the workplace pay?

16) Can you summarise some of the advantages and disadvantages of the course?

17) Are there any other comments about the course and how it has effected you that you would like to make?